# Native or non-native: who makes a better english teacher

Introduction

In the recent years, the increase in the number of non-native English speakers (NNS) in the world has led to the appearance of so many different varieties of English and has influenced some important issues related to English language teaching (ELT). The terms Native and Non-native have been used to refer to speakers of a language. Since about only one out of four users of English in the world is a native speaker (NS) of the language (Crystal, 2003), most interactions take place among non-native speakers (NNS) of English. According to Kachru's three circles: inner (native English speaking countries), outer (counties where English is not the primary language but is widely spoken) and expanding (countries where learning of English is encouraged), the majority of English speakers are located in the outer or expanding circles, using English as lingua franca (EFL) (Quirk and Widdowson, 1985, p. 11).

One of the main subjects running through discussions of ELF is the insignificance of native speakers, their ownership of English and their Englishes, confirmed by the fact that English is the language for internationalcommunicationand is nowadays used by more non-native than native speakers. This leads to theoretical assertions such as ' World English (WE) belongs to everyone who speaks it, but is nobody'smother tongue' (Rajagopalan, 2004, p. 3) and how English develops in the world is of no relevance to native English speaking countries (Widdowson, 1994, p. 385). Also a pedagogical claim, is that as long as English is learned as an international language, it should not be thought as an inner circle language

and should not come from an inner circle country (Matsuda, 2003). What's more, it is well-known that not all native speakeing teachers of English have the necessary qualifications to do so. However, it is often taken for granted that the only rightful speakers of a language are its native speakers (Cook, 1999). On the other hand, sometimes qualified non-native English speaking teachers are not considered good by administrators in order to get teaching jobs. In many cases they do not realise how much they can learn from non-native speaking teachers and they believe that the native speaker is the best.

In this paper, I will explore the topic of native speakers and the ownership of language. I will also discuss strengths and weaknesses of native and non-native language teachers and how they benefit them in ELT contexts. Also I will draw attention to which type of English we should teach and which languageteacheris better: a native or non native English speaker.

## Which type of model should we teach?

The general assumption of the purpose of teaching English is to develop student's proficiency as closely as possible to that of native speakers. It is widely believed that Standard English can ensure the high quality of clear communication and standard of intelligibility. Therefore, both American English and British English are considered as the right choice for EFL/ESL learners in formaleducation. However, according to the up-going trend of world Englishes, EFL/ESL learners should be encouraged to learn different varieties of English to meet different needs, rather than only the Standard or standard variety of English.

Standard English is usually defined as a variety of English which is used in speaking and writing by ' educated' language users, and is concerned with lexis and grammar, but not pronunciation (Trudgill and Hannah, 1994).

Standard English is not a language, but only one minority of given English. Firstly, British English was regarded as Standard English because of the expansion of British colony power. Also, American English is commonly considered as Standard English due to the fact that U. S. grows to be a leading economic and military power. So, the next question is which variety of English will be the next Standard English in the futureIt is hard to predict the answer which country will dominate word economic and military power in the futureConsequently, from a historical perspective there is no fixed Standard English. Trudgil (1999, p. 125) presumes, Standard English is the only dialect with great prestige that differs from other dialects of English and the difference in those varieties do not point out the linguistic superiority of the standard form.

## Issues relying upon native speaker norms

Kachru suggests that if we classify Standard English dialects according to how closely they look like an original native speaker model, then we might also believe American English to be a fossilised interlanguage of its historically large immigrant population (Jenkins, 2002).

Jenkins (2002) tried to find a reasonable target for speakers of different first languages to be able to comprehend one another. Regardless of luck of available research on the subject, it is safe to say that specific characteristics

of NSs pronunciation are likely to cause problems for NNs in both reception and production: one of this is the tendency of many native speakers to reduce unstressed vowels (Jenkins, 2002).

Another issue has been highlighted by Cook (1999) that to be a ' native speaker' of a language, you must have acquired that language from birth. She argues that, non-native English speakers can never assume the identity of a ' native speaker' no matter how hard they try… it is like expecting ducks to become swans (Cook, 1999, p. 187-190). The study by Golobek and Jordan (2005) pointed out that some students see the native speaker ideal as unachievable: they feel that their English is never sufficient and that there are always new vocabularies and slang, thus they feel incompetent to speak English fluently (Golobek and Jordan, 2005, p. 519-520).

## Advantages of native and non-native English speakers in the EFL/ESL classroom

First indications regarding the differences between native and non-native speaking EFL/ ESL teachers appeared in the 80's. For example Edge (1988) advocated the importance of giving ' real' models (native speakers of the EFL/ESL students' languages) to the students. As supported by McKey (2003) these ' real' models speak the language of the students natively and have learned to speak English well, as opposed to ' foreign' models (NSs) who do not share the social, cultural and emotional experience of the students.

The first person to write an article comparing native and non-native English speaking teachers was Medgyes (1992, p. 348). In the article he stated that the ideal NS teacher is the one who has attained a high degree of proficiency

in the learners' mother tongue and the ideal NNS teacher is the one who has atteined near-native proficiency in English.

Another ongoing debate is who makes a better teacher, native or non-native speakersAccording to Canagarajah NSs will be better teachers in EFL context because of their uniquecultureknowledge, while NNSs will be better teachers in ESL context because of their multicultural experience (Braine, 1999, p. 77). This claim is not supported by Teachers of English to Speakers of other Languages (TESOL) teachers, who seem to believe that NNS teachers would be better teachers in their own countries (Llurda, 2005). In contrast to this Medgyes (1994) has described the following positive features about NNS teachers, that they:

can provide more information about the language to their students

are a good learner model to their students

can teach language strategies effectively

understand the difficulties and

can use the students native language to their advantage in EFL settings

And then he explains that if the insufficient language of the NNS teachers is corrective they have equal chance to achieve professional success as the native English-speaking teachers.

Several studies were conducted that investigated the pedagogical and linguistic differences between non-native and native English-speaking teachers. For example McNeil (2005) noticed that trainee Chinese non-native teachers were very skilled at predicting which word would be difficult and

easy to understand for Cantonese-speaking EFL students, while both expert and trainee native –speaking teachers were incapable of making accurate predictions. Another example is when it comes to finding and correcting errors NNSs were often less tolerant of errors than NSs when marking college-level ESL assignments (Sheorey, 1986). According to Barratt and Kontra (2000) regarding to language awareness, NSs are often unable to empathize with students going through the learning process. Additionally, NS teachers can also easily discourage their students since they are hardly even able to make useful contrasts and comparisons with the learners' first language. Arva and Medgyes (2000) supported the above statement in their study which showed a unique advantage NNS English teachers have over NS teachers is that they can empathise very well with their students' learning difficulties and understand what it is to be homesick and experience culture shock (in ESL context).

Lastly, NNS teachers can be very much admired by their students because they are successful role models and often very motivated (Lee, 2000, cited in Llurda, 2005, p. 107). As Cook (Llurda, 2005, p. 57) clarifies, NNS teachers provide examples of people who have become successful second language (L2) users and provide models of proficient (L2) users in action in the classroom. This example shows that NNS teachers demonstrate to their students what is possible with a second language, their appreciation for that language and its culture. To conclude, instead of looking at NSs and NNSs as a two separate groups (one being better or more qualified to be a teacher than the other), we should emphasise cooperation and help between NS and

NNS teachers, since both groups have specific advantages and weaknesses ( Matsuda and Matsuda, 2001).

## Some classroom implications

Classroom implications comprise what needs to be done to give all the necessary tools to NNSs and NSs teachers so that they are able to meet the expectations of EFL and ESL students. The presented issues discussed above show a distinct need for TESOL preparation programs by offering additional courses for future NNS and NS teachers (Golombek and Jordan, 2005). Such classes could help ensure future teachers to get ready pedagogically for their teaching assignment. Additionally, this could help NSs of English become aware of their strengths and weaknesses and learn to collaborate with NNSs to offer the best teaching to students. This preparation and collaboration of both groups (NSs and NNSs) is important when NSs will be teaching in countries where English is not the main language and where NNSs may be at a distinct advantage (Medgyes, 1994; Govowdhan et al. 1999). Furthermore, recognising and working with the multiple identities of non-native and native EFL/ESL trainee teachers would help establish their legitimacy as teachers (Golombek and Jordan, 2005). Another aspect is that youth plays an important role in today's globalisation and the spread of English (Berns de Bot and Hasebrink, 2007), because English is strongly influencing the lives of children and young adults to where the politics, economy, educational changes, culture and societies are shaped by their knowledge (or lack of knowledge) of English. It is uncertain that this knowledge of English will be restricted to one single variety of the language,

because new varieties of Englishes are evolving throughout the world (Kachru, 1985; Jenkins 2000; Berns at al. 2007) with accents, words and expressions.

## Conclusion

Taking into consideration in the use of English today, it appears vital not to teach ESL/EFL students one single model or accent, but essential to present them with a large range of English varieties represented by teachers from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Jenkins, 2000). What's more EFL/ESL students can make a choice and decide for themselves what is most relevant to their context and experience (Bentahaila and Davies, 1989). Research has proved that both native and non-native speakers of English have their own strengths and weaknesses. The main difference between both groups is that " NSs have the more extensive experience as language users whereas the NNSs have had experience as language learners" (Widdowson, 1992, p. 338). As a growing number of people around the world want to learn English the number of NN English teachers is accordingly increasing and better attention has been given to what they bring to the language classroom (Moussu and Llurda, 2008, p. 341). Regardless of the existing belief that, native speakers of a language make better teachers, the amount of research questioning this and providing evidence on how important it is to recognise the strengths in native and non-native teachers has been valuable and has sown that both can be equally good professionals, in spite their native and non-native status. As stated by Matsuda (2001) ' language background is only one of many factors that

define who we are as a professional' and without a doubt, it is unreasonable to judge professionals in regards to their native language alone.

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